

Summary on Outdoor, Water-Related Recreation Resources
By Grant Cunningham

1. Status

Historically and presently, the region's economic and social sustainability revolves around its water resources. Water is the region's dominant natural feature, and unquestionably, it is its most important resource. As the population of Berkeley, Charleston and Dorchester counties continues to grow -- increasing from 506,875 in 1990 to an estimated 739,100 by the year 2015 (an increase of 46%) -- the accessibility of outdoor, water-related recreational opportunities will diminish for area residents and tourists, particularly if no steps are taken to address future inadequacies. Public access to the water resources of the region is taken for granted and assumed available in perpetuity. However, as the pressure of population growth increases, public access will be adversely impacted, possibly decreasing as a result of the gradual change from rural to suburban land ownership.

An inventory of the water resources of the region identified over 130 bodies of water in the CHP area, with more than two-thirds located in Charleston County. The major bodies of water within the study area include: Ashley River, Cooper River, East Branch Cooper River, West Branch Cooper River, Lake Moultrie, Stono River, North Edisto River, Wando River, Charleston Harbor, and the Atlantic Ocean. Altogether, Charleston County has 92 bodies of water in the listing; Berkeley County has 40, and Dorchester has 12. In addition, there are numerous unnamed creeks across the region which have not been included in the total.

Further, an inventory of outdoor recreation amenities and activities involving water resources in the region included 194 listings. The inventory contained among other things: 50 boat ramps, 33 city parks, 23 golf courses, 18 marinas, 14 fishing camps, 12 special events, six state parks, five county parks, five campgrounds, four house and gardens, four walking tours, three gardens, two forest preserves, two state agencies, two boat tours, and one magnificent old oak tree. Further analysis indicates that 125 of the listings are located in Charleston County, 53 in Berkeley, and 15 in Dorchester. One listing, the Francis Marion National Forest, is located in both Berkeley and Charleston counties. Most of the listings are found along several major bodies of water. There are 18 listings on the Ashley River, 16 on Lake Moultrie, 14 on the Atlantic Ocean, eight on the Cooper River, seven around Charleston Harbor, seven on Lake Marion, seven on the Stono River, five on the Edisto River, four each on the Folly and Wando Rivers, and three each on Bohicket Creek,

Boone Hall Creek, Santee River, and Tailrace Canal.

There were 24 governmental or quasi-governmental entities that provide recreational services or maintain recreational facilities in the region; however, less than half are involved in outdoor, water-related recreation. There are 117 listings in the inventory operated by a public entity, and 73 listings are commercially operated. Three could not be determined. Regarding fees, 84 listings are fee-operated; 57 do not charge a fee, and 53 are not determinable. Furthermore, 49 listings provide rental equipment. Though 26 listings provide overnight accommodations, 103 do not, and the status of 65 are unknown.

2. Threats

Arguably, rapid population growth -- coupled with inappropriate land conversion practices -- poses the greatest threat to the water resources in the region. Population growth exacerbates other problems, particularly pollution and access for competing uses. Moreover, as rapid growth occurs, the demand among competitive interests to use the region's water resources increases, but the supply cannot keep pace. As always, a primary use is recreation, however recreational usage does not usually receive high consideration from planners and other governmental officials, unless it is couched in terms related to economic development. Thus, the supply for recreational use of the water resources languishes leading to crowding at existing sites and conflict among user groups.

An equally important consideration involving access is finding the means to fairly distribute recreational opportunities to all residents across various socioeconomic groups. There is a need to remove and prevent barriers to opportunities and participation, particularly impediments created by socioeconomic differences. For centuries, the water resources of the region have served all for many purposes; in particular, outdoor, water-related recreational opportunities must continue to be available for all socioeconomic groups.

Additionally, users of the resource must become partners in maintaining the resource and associated amenities to eliminate vandalism and other destructive activities. More programming involving resource protection and conservation is needed to educate recreational users and other parties about these issues.

Lastly, current planning efforts must balance the dynamics of economic and social growth with the static

requirements of the natural environment. An understanding of the assimilative capacity of the water system is necessary to prevent potential devastating impacts. Otherwise, many uses may become less productive or less enjoyable as the resource is degraded beyond immediate repair.

3. Urgency

Overall, the urgency of the threats to outdoor, water-related recreation is clearly in the mid-range -- seemingly low and agreeably not high. First, the problems that pollution poses for recreational uses of the water resources are no more severe than the problems pollution creates for other uses. However, recreational use that exacerbates pollution should be controlled and minimized. Second, competition among types of uses for the water resources is intense but not at an impasse, yet. Planners should keep in mind that recreation can be a key component of both economic development and environmental protection, serving as a bargaining chip from either perspective. Third, there is currently enough room in the water for various recreational uses, but population growth, tourism expansion, and economic and residential development may soon -- 10 to 20 years -- create access problems for certain activities in particular areas. Recreational opportunities may be diminished for some user groups.

4. Management Needs

Regarding pollution and degradation of vital habitat areas, there are existing laws and regulations administered by federal, state and local governments to address any problem. A detailed assessment of the regulatory framework involving water pollution is provided elsewhere in this document. Beyond this, there is a need to increase public awareness and involvement in maintaining the vitality of the Charleston Harbor system. An enlightened public could become the best steward of the land and water resources.

Though South Carolina law contains the concept that the State owns all of the lands below the mean high water mark for tidally-influenced water bodies, the law does not require that a developer must provide any type of access to an adjacent body of water. However, if any access is provided or established (through prescriptive easement or implied dedication), the State will protect the continuation of such access for the benefit of the public.

For the most part, public access to water-related recreational opportunities is provided by municipalities and counties in the region. As stated above, there are 24 governmental or quasi-governmental entities that provide recreational services or maintain recreational facilities in the region; however, less than half are involved in outdoor, water-related recreation. Particularly, there is no county-sponsored recreation program in either Berkeley or Dorchester counties, which has hampered the development of outdoor recreation in areas outside of city-owned or state-held lands.

Furthermore, the several small communities in the rural areas of these counties cannot afford such development.

Ideally, the provision of outdoor, water-related recreational opportunities should be coordinated through a plan developed by the various providers in the region. This requires the input and assistance of appropriate officials from all local governments in the Charleston Harbor Area. Ultimately, the responsibility of developing such a regional recreation plan falls upon those local governments, coupled with assistance from the State.

5. Policy Recommendations

The improvement in the quality of outdoor recreational opportunities in the area hinges on the involvement of residents and the providers. Obviously, the providers should lead this effort. Clearly, recreation development in the area must address three critical issues: demand is increasing while resources (sites and funding) are limited; as the types of uses grow, increased conflict between user groups can be expected; and, degradation of the resource from pollution and loss of critical habitat through inappropriate development practices will diminish recreational opportunities for many user groups. Policy recommendations are listed as follows:

Issue. **Demand is increasing while resources (sites and funds) are limited.**

Policy: Existing sites should be well-maintained and in good repair.

Policy: Programs should be initiated to maximize public access and the benefits derived from these limited public resources.

Policy: Acquisition programs should put a high priority on acquiring and developing waterfront properties.

Policy: Recreational and educational programs should be utilized to direct the public from overused facilities to underused sites.

Policy: Recreation facilities and programs should help to educate the public on the benefits and wonder of nature and the value of natural ecological systems.

Policy: Public/private partnerships should be encouraged in order to help generate the revenues needed to acquire, develop and operate needed recreation-oriented facilities and programs.

* Policy: Encourage/promote land use regulation/growth management and comprehensive planning that requires (or at least encourages) development patterns where public water-based areas are set aside.

* Policy: Encourage impact fees on future development that allows banking of funds to acquire recreational areas for the public.

Policy: The provision of outdoor, water-related recreational opportunities should be coordinated through a plan developed by the various providers in the region, allowing input from appropriate officials of all local governments in the Charleston Harbor Area.

Issue. As the types of uses grow, increased conflict between user groups can be expected.

Policy: Recognizing that certain activities in particular areas should be minimized.

Policy: Recreational and educational programs should be utilized to direct the public from overused to underused facilities.

Policy: Water-related recreational opportunities should be fairly distributed among all user groups.

Issue. Degradation of the resource from pollution and loss of critical habitat through inappropriate development practices will diminish recreational opportunities for many user groups.

Policy: Recreational facilities and programs should help to educate the public on the benefits and wonder of nature and the value of natural ecological systems.

Policy: An analysis of existing regulations is needed to ensure that recreational use does not add

significantly to the pollution and degradation problem.

6. Consequences of Inaction

As the pressure of population growth increases, public access will be adversely impacted, possibly decreasing as a result of the gradual change from rural to suburban land ownership. Further, the tremendous growth in the region will increase the demand among competitive interests to use the region's water resources. Conflict between competing user groups will rise, having potentially disastrous outcomes for the people involved and the resource. Lastly, failure to strike a balance between economic development and environmental protection could have devastating consequences on the economic and social stability of the region. Overdevelopment and overuse will render the resource less productive and less enjoyable for all parties.

7. Long-term Monitoring Needs

As growth continues in the region, public access, crowding, resource degradation, and facility maintenance must be monitored.

The first priority should be maintenance of existing sites and facilities. Upgrades and repairs should occur at heavily-used sites immediately to prevent injuries and conflict between user groups over access. Next, crowding should be monitored through user surveys and field observation. Redirecting recreational uses to underused sites and facilities may be needed, and identifying areas for new sites and facilities is required. Further, recreation proponents must monitor the attitudes of users, public officials and society in general to competently argue the need for outdoor recreation development.

In the debate for sufficient funding, an increase in the recreation budget is often viewed as the request most difficult to justify, in light of all the other programs clamoring for more money. Each of these three activities should be ongoing presently within agencies responsible for recreation development and programming. The cost to carry out such activities can be relatively inexpensive, depending on the resources available to the agency.

Degradation of the water resource should be monitored by other appropriate agencies, and parties responsible for recreational services and facilities should keep abreast of any information generated from them. The information on pollution and loss of critical habitats should fuel the argument for sound recreation planning, not deter it.

8. Research Needs

The level of satisfaction with the region's water-related recreational opportunities may become tenuous in the next few years, particularly as the region's population steadily rises which eventually will lead to overstressed recreational resources and facilities. Discontent among user groups is sure to follow as they seek wider support for their interests from government and the public. It is important, therefore, to address the potential conflicts in advance. Recreation proponents must gather information on the evolving socio-political environment to successfully address the numerous potential problems that could arise in the next ten to twenty years.

Further, since the BCD region must expect growth, and with that, an increased demand for various outdoor, water-related recreational facilities and services, current planning efforts must ensure the stability and vitality of the natural resource base. Otherwise, the resource will become less functional and less enjoyable as the resource is degraded beyond immediate repair. Therefore, recreation development must incorporate strategies of preservation and conservation to achieve success in managing the highly-valued water resources.

Indeed, the need for more information on the users and the capacity of the resource is the greatest task facing researchers involved in recreation management. It is a tall order, but unavoidable if preservation and conservation efforts are given any hope for success. All user groups must become partners in maintaining the integrity and productiveness of the region's coastal waters ecosystem.